

SUNDARBANS

WHERE SURREALISM IS THE REALITY



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My tour guide asks me at the guest house in Satjelia: Do you want to see magic? A bit puzzled, I say: why not. Come. As our boat tows through the waters at night, the silence of the Sundarbans is eerie yet soothing. The water planktons radiate from the river and the fog transposes us into beautiful, surreal visions. I was carrying my camera but such scenes cannot be captured. They can only be lived by experience. And indeed the experience is such that the memories always remain vivid in the mind of the beholder.

I visited Sundarbans in February 2017 for the reason every traveller comes to this tide country: to navigate through the tiger reserve. Beginning of my sojourn was the usual: Waking up early. Breakfast on the ferry amidst the mist. Waiting for approvals. Getting a guide on board. Entering the reserve with fifteen other tourists. Tens of ferries heading in the same direction. There is never a dull moment when you're accompanied by equally enthusiastic tourists, both Indians and foreigners. Talks emerge, cultures intermingle, bonds are made. Some even last beyond the trip. It was during these conversations, with mangroves oozing out of water on each side of the ferry and birds sitting on tree tops, when our Captain spotted on his left a small patch of brownish orange in the greenery of the forests. TIGER. TIGER. The ferry starts rotating to the left. Bam. Frenzied tourists try to meet the Captain's sight. Bam. I move on a raised platform at the back of the ferry. Click, Click, Click. The tiger, which was drinking sweet water ostensibly from a small pool constructed by the Forest Department, sees us. Bam. Vanishes.

For us, spotting the Royal Bengal Tiger is a moment of jubilation, for the people of Sundarbans it is the occasion of being fearfully awestruck. Hundreds of fishermen, honey-collectors, and even villagers are killed every year by the tigers in both India and Bangladesh. Recounting these stories, our guide Manjit tells us about Bon Bibi and Dokhin Rai. I recollect the festive atmosphere I had seen the previous night in Satjelia, it was to celebrate Bon Bibi. A bit of google, a bit of conversations and I understand the reverence for Bon Bibi. Mythology smells sweet in Sundarbans. Being the goddess of the forest, she protects the people from the furry of Dokhin Rai. Dokhin Rai, in the form of a tiger, attacks those who get engulfed by greed and try to extract too much from the forest. Both are revered and worshipped. On the one hand people pray to the idols, on the other hand the recitals have a constant reference to Allah. Confusing? Not for the locals.



The tiger drinking water, clicked from the ferry.

Sauntering around the village and bumping into a congregation of people gathered to witness ‘cock fights’, I discover the recreational activities the locals partake in. The cocks fight it out with a blade attached to their legs, the losing cock is handed over to the owner of the winning one. A large gathering is also a call for other stalls to crop up. No sooner do I get closer, my eyes fall on make-shift rice beer stalls. Prepared after laborious tasks extending almost three days, these are usually offered by the womenfolk.

You should try.

Of course.

First bowl.

Second bowl. Two and a half.

Tangy. Smooth. I wish I could have taken some of it home!

Talking of local delicacies and no mention of fish? Impossible. Some deeds have an opportune moment and my arrived on the ferry in Sundarbans. I had never eaten a fish- *Maach* as they say- before but the cook on the ferry insisted me to taste it. How could have I slipped away this opportunity of locally prepared, fresh fish? Despite my fear of fish bones getting stuck in my mouth, I tried. My taste buds are ever grateful for that decision. What a delight it was. Clearly, having fish; on a ferry; passing through mangrove forests: it has to be on the list of every visitor.



Preparations in swing to celebrate the festival of Bon Bibi.



Rice beer being prepared for the people gathered to watch the cock fights.

A traveller doesn't merely wander for recreation. It is the urge to know different cultures, to witness the joys and sorrows of the land that she picks up the backpack. In Sundarbans, it is hard to miss the everyday struggles of life.

".....She raised herself on her elbow and said, 'Sing' 'Louder. Sing Louder.'

At this he tilted his head back and sang a few notes. The melody surprised her, for it bore no resemblance to any Indian music she had ever heard before.....His voice sounded almost hoarse and it seemed to crack and sob as it roamed the notes. There was a suggestion of grief in it that unsettled and disturbed her."

One of my evenings in Satjelia was spent amongst the musicians who sang songs of the tide country. Of love. Of marriage. Of Bon Bibi. Of sorrow. Of cyclone Aila. Of lost lives. Of destroyed farms. Though I didn't understand the language, the introductions and the 'melody' would usually fill the gap. People who worked at the guest house I was staying in also did farming, some did fishing, others ventured into forrest. Dependence on merely one source of livelihood is not enough. Despite their hardwork the statistics reflect poor economic status of most of the people of the tide country. Havocs of cyclones, floods and storms only add to the misery of the people.

Though I was in Sundarbans for less than two days, the memories I made can extinguish months of other mundane experiences.

Travel to Sundarbans, to fall in love with nature. To also witness the wrath of nature. To enjoy the hospitality of the locals. To also relate with their misery and to understand our priviledges.



People await the low tide- Bhata- to subside so that boats can be taken to the river bank.